

# First Public Hearing of 2020-2024 Consolidated Plan for Housing and Community Development Meeting Minutes

Location: Webinar

Date: March 23, 2020

Time: 11:00 a.m.

## **Janelle Egli, Montana Department of Commerce, Community Development (DOC CDD)**

- Explained the purpose of the public hearing
- Reviewed a brief Power Point presentation explaining:
  - What the consolidated plan is and the public participation process
  - Goals and Objectives and year one resources
  - Planning process, documents, and components of the ConPlan

## **Opened the Webinar to public comments:**

### **Mariah Rameriz, United Way of Helena**

- Does the current, I'm sure this goes without saying, but can you give us just a little bit of a picture of how this plan might be changing in light of the current crisis?
  - **Janelle Egli, DOC CDD** – I will not be responding to comments at this current time. What we will do is, we will take all the comments that are provided today, and we will draft a response collectively as a division and agency, jointly with the Department of Health and Human Services (DPHHS). Please know that we are going to respond to your comments as quickly as we can and thank you for providing them.
  - **Jennifer Olson, DOC CDD** – If I could interject, Janelle, I totally agree 100%. Mariah, I just wanted to also help clarify, this comment is to help us prepare for the next Consolidated Plan which is to help draft any changes that would be helpful for communities' use of the HUD Program funds that are within the Consolidated Plan. So, any thoughts that you have about what those potential changes are would be very helpful for us so that we can put those into the draft plan and so, later this year, around about June timeframe, we're going to be looking to send out our draft plan so that you will be able to see what we have identified as to the use of those funds. So right now, there is as Janelle said earlier, an open opportunity for comments to be received to help us plan and develop programs that will be responsive, not only to COVID 19, but also anything else the communities are dealing with. So, again, any comments that you have that will help us identify what those programmatic changes may need to be is more than welcome and very encouraged.
- Beautiful! This is my first round with Consolidated Plan and so I'm still kind of learning. I originally thought it was going to be my boss on here, so you guys get me instead, so thanks for being patient. I can certainly comment on some of those things that we are seeing right now if that's useful. We have been working alongside Good Samaritan Ministries to bring about a more consistent check in between non-profits and service providers in the Helena area during this

time and what we are seeing over and over again is this intense strain on systems that were already strained. The need for assistance has gone up, we keep getting comments that we have heard over and over again that the unemployment website is crashing, with the rules about social distancing, it's difficult to provide services in the ways that we have previously; group settings and group facilities are now struggling to figure out how to serve people which is of course is making it extremely challenging, not in any means ignore the fact that we've got huge swaths of people that we can't even serve right now who are out in encampments, who have lost jobs due to this crisis, families who don't know how to search for assistance in different realms, so the COVID situation really has changed the landscape on something that was already very challenging. Service providers are struggling to even get their basic needs filled at the moment, so as we are talking about Consolidated Plan going forward, I think the landscape has to be around a rebuilding and a recognition of where things were right before this happened because the systems were, as I already mentioned, already strained, were already lacking in things like case management and resource coordination. So, as we move forward trying to have a clear communication about what is available, what housing is available, what resources can be used, is there an expansion of or a leniency with requirements for things like vouchers? How, at the moment, we are dealing with a bunch of people who are at risk of losing their housing because their landlords are demanding rent despite the loss of jobs, so how does that play into this question? How does that shape where we are going to go because our systems, especially from HUD funding for voucher programs, I foresee us having an influx of applications and an influx of outreach for those services; and how do we work with the landlords too because they've got to be able to make ends meet for themselves as well, so I think that's really going to shape how things go from here. And thank you for being patient with me, I'm historically good at rambling, but I'm under the weather myself and I always ramble more when I'm under the weather so thank you for being patient with me.

#### **Heather McMillin, Homeward**

- I will testify in a moment to what I would traditionally testify in a normal environment, but at this point the things that I would add because I do appreciate the previous comments, is that for us at Homeward, we are trying to retool our financial education and our homebuyer education, specifically financial because we are being flooded with questions around the unknown and when the federal rules come out or whatever is approved comes out, we are trying to adapt our education components to be able to reach as many people as we can and serve, and while webinars and zoom and all of those pieces are helpful, we have discussed this morning about doing/recording live Facebook posts for educational components of facts that we see and resources that we see as they come out. This will be different than our traditional financial fitness 10 hour, HUD approved process, and so related to this consolidated plan or the testimony here, hoping, I'm assuming, we are not seeing a lot of HUD guidance right now and I'm assuming you are all not as well, but that we will track how we are reaching people and meeting the requirements in different ways than traditional and that you help us with that flexibility to still deliver services in an environment that we are working within, so we will hope that we can continue to talk more in the future and again follow up with things that we may know in June, if there is again additional testimony allowed for the consolidated plan. I think that the funding sources are critical to organizations trying to provide these good services as

previously stated. I do think that from a consolidated standpoint that we need to make sure that we are using the funds to develop homes people can afford from low/very low up to moderate, people are struggling across the board in all our communities and so that is always going to be important. Spending those funds on projects that are long term/sustainable both physically from a sustainability standpoint and operational stability are important. One thing that we are paying close attention to are trying to come up with rent concessions if needed, again, depending on how things roll out over the next few weeks, few months, over the next year, are there ways to not upset the entire project or upset the applecart so to speak from a financial/operational stability standpoint, going to our tax-credit investors and tapping operational reserves which we would not normally do if there are special conditions to allow for that; just knowing that you all may need to consider helping the landlords in this situation of deed restricted, affordable homes along the way that might be something that comes out. Lots of this is trying to use our crystal ball to project what is going to happen, there will always be a need, the past needs are going to be compounded by this, so flexibility in the programs and creativity to try to navigate the rules and applying and getting things to the individuals as they need them. I am certain that we will continue to need accessible housing, that will always be important, so both universal design, accessible design, doing more than the base minimum for housing. Another key component are the services coordination that was spoke to at the previous testimony that we are hoping that our state's housing agency and our state, I would probably say this wrong and I know everybody is on the webinar, but the mental health/physical health, all of those programmatic connections to our residents are important and so I think permanent supportive housing and trying to connect the lowest income to the right services in the right way as they are doing in Helena, we are working on that in Missoula, so I think those are priorities with trying to connect resources and services and helping us connect those dots the right way are important. I'm sure there are a few more things that we will submit in writing, but I just wanted to give the overall from Homeward's view and standpoint at this point, so thank you.

**Travis Hoffman, Summit Independent Living**

- I just wanted to add to some stuff that Heather just mentioned. There is a need for some accessible housing and I know there is a need in Missoula so I can imagine there is a need elsewhere across the state, many of the subsidized apartment buildings that do exist now were built long ago, a lot of them lack even basic accessibility features like door handles and whatnot, but I think another important aspect of providing accessible housing is education of property managers and landlords around fair housing laws. What we see is sometimes they aren't aware of how to process reasonable accommodation requests, different things like that and especially when there is a tenant with mental illness or some type of behavioral issues, if somebody has a bad day or an episode or something like that, they are quick to be evicted instead of working through what they need to work through and working with the landlord to ensure that they can maintain their housing. So I think education of landlords, tenants and property managers, needs to be a big part of providing accessible housing because not all of accessibility comes in terms of physical accessibility.

**Pam Bean, Montana Fair Housing**

- I wanted to follow up on some of the comments folks have made and appreciate very much Travis' points. Right before everything closed down, we were making rounds with property managers and the landlords association specifically on accommodations and modifications, and one of the issues I really agree with Travis in regards to is not only the physical access, there are several other types of disabilities that accommodations can work for and waylay evictions or foreclosures and we are hoping education will be something that the consolidated plan continues to support and target in regards to the design and construction when folks say that they are unaware of construction of units in an accessible manner as per the Fair Housing Act and 504. We send letters every month to developers and owners about those requirements when they get permits for covered multifamily dwellings, so when they say they are unaware and they are constructing four or more units, that is not true; they are getting that information. The problem I think more lies with what is really affordable for folks with some of the physical/accessible needs, the affordable housing that's going up I don't see as really affordable to a large number of folks and I wish nationally, let alone in the State of Montana, we could come up with pots of funding beyond these tax credit units because they really are a barrier for affordability for a huge group of consumers. We also hope that continued support comes out in the consolidated plan to reach housing providers and consumers about discrimination against all protected groups and beyond. Our largest number of complaints relate to folks with disabilities in Montana for a number of reasons, but there are also many more protected classes that I think focus should I think begin to turn to as well especially coming on the heels of COVID-19 I think a lot of folks are going to be experiencing discrimination that was not so overt in the past. Thanks.

**Janelle Egli, DOC CDD**

Read a question into the record submitted in the chat:

*Are there any more documents on the website, in relation to providing comment for the Consolidated Plan?*

- We do have a survey open through the end of the month that folks can participate in if they haven't already done so. We don't have any published documents for the Consolidated Plan yet. As we indicated earlier, the input that we gather during this webinar will help us draft our Consolidated Plan documents. So really, we don't have anything published for review as of yet. A publication of the Consolidated Plan will happen in June and we will provide notification when that is published. Upon publication, we will have a three-day comment period and we will solicit comments from the public so that we can further fine-tune our Consolidated Plan and address other issues that might come up down the road. So, if you haven't subscribed to our email list, I encourage you to do so. As soon as we have documents published or have notifications we send out regarding the Consolidated Plan process, we will send those out via GovDelivery. You can subscribe to our listserv by going to the Department's website, [comdev.mt.gov](http://comdev.mt.gov), you will be able to subscribe to our listserv; and if you need any help doing so, please feel free to give us a phone call or shoot us an email.

**Mariah Rameriz, United Way of Helena**

- Is there a chance for a second opportunity for call in comments at some point, only because I know that, just from people talking with people this morning, that there were a lot of folks who

thought this was cancelled this morning and chose not to participate because of that; or would you prefer everything comes in in a written format?

- **Jennifer Olson, DOC CDD** - I appreciate the comment, Mariah, we will definitely take that under consideration and see if we can't open up another hearing opportunity or webinar opportunity. In the interim, definitely please do submit any written comments to us. Again, this is all for the development of the plan, so any ideas, thoughts, or suggestions you have will definitely be helpful not only to Commerce but also to DPHHS as we all work to develop and improve the response of the HUD programs that we administer here at the state level. So we will definitely communicate back out and I believe Janelle will, she's already said it once before, and I guess I'll ask here to say it one more time, but you can submit your comments as well to DOC CONPLAN email and we can make sure to respond but then also feel free to send us an email as well to say...hey, add me to the listserv so I get all of the Consolidated Plan emails and communications. But I do appreciate everybody joining us this morning especially with the significant changes of all of our working environments last week. Does that answer your question Mariah?
- It does. Thank you for being patient with me, I'm operating under a little bit of a feverish back/forth on my brain, so thank you. I screen shot the information on how to get stuff in to folks so that's great, I'll just pass that along to folks who might want to add their comment.

#### **Janelle Egli, DOC CDD**

- In response to Jennifer's request, I will reiterate, we will be accepting written comments through April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 5:00 close of business. You can address those comments to the Montana Department of Commerce, Community Development Division, Attn ConPlan, PO Box 200523, Helena, MT 59620 or to our email address which is DOC CONPLAN@MT.GOV.

#### **Heather McMilin, Homeward**

- I'm going to quickly say I recognize this is the consolidated plan hearing and the need to keep up with what our old timelines were and continue to be required meeting that, I would hope that we could possibly have a call outside the consolidated plan and in the coming weeks as federal plans come out and what people are hearing being able to talk to you about flexibility with drawing funds for certain programs and getting those programs administered and outside the formal testimony and more of a what's HUD saying and how are things adapting, so thank you.

#### **Janelle Egli, DOC CDD**

- Thank you to everyone who participated in this webinar, we really appreciate you joining us; there's a lot of priorities out there right now and we are very thankful that we have an engaged public who is willing to give us input on the Consolidated Plan and the work that we are doing. So, thank you very much for joining us and we look forward to your continued engagement as we go through the process and submitting to HUD our final Consolidated Plan.